

Scaling early childhood services in cities: lessons from four Urban95 case studies

- ▶ *Urban95 can help cities to overcome challenges in scaling early childhood services.*
- ▶ *Princeton researchers studied Urban95 programmes in Tel Aviv, Tirana, Boa Vista and Recife.*
- ▶ *Success factors include top-level support and study tours to see initiatives in action elsewhere.*

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Scaling early childhood development initiatives is challenging: costs often remain high; early childhood investments compete with other priorities; distrust or disruption may impede take-up in fragile communities; programmes may not reach the intended groups or neighbourhoods; there are not always enough staff members with the right skills and aptitudes; and streamlining can be difficult within different departments. Princeton University's Innovations for Successful Societies (ISS) programme developed case studies, reviewed by LSE Cities, that profile how four partner cities of the Bernard van Leer Foundation's Urban95 initiative – Tel Aviv (Israel), Tirana (Albania), Boa Vista (Brazil) and Recife (Brazil) – have addressed these coordination and delivery challenges.¹

Urban95 aims to integrate early childhood services and make it easier and safer for caregivers with babies and toddlers to reach delivery points, with convenient play areas along the routes. In this way, a city can improve access to early childhood development programmes; help private, non-profit and public providers reduce their costs and expand their reach; and enable families with infants and young children to take advantage of learning opportunities in the environment around them. More broadly, Urban95 gives children a 'voice' that can help to accelerate change in long-standing urban challenges, from air quality to the provision of public space.

This effort to integrate service provision with the kind of urban planning usually associated with the city's built environment requires capacity to promote sustained collaboration at multiple levels and across departments. Urban95 aims to develop the necessary leadership, strategic thinking and other skills needed to bring early childhood-focused initiatives to scale. It is about securing authorisation to make changes in both services and streetscape, setting goals collaboratively, making the case for wider social and environmental co-benefits associated with early childhood investment, building understanding and momentum among municipal staff members, working closely with communities, following up, and collecting the information needed for evidence-based policy.

Valuable ideas

The Princeton ISS case studies highlight some positive lessons learned during the past two years as well as some areas where progress has proven harder but where good ideas can make a big difference.

¹ To read case studies on the Foundation's partnerships exploring ways to take services for babies, toddlers and caregivers to scale, visit: <https://bernardvanleer.org/publications-reports/scaling-partnerships-case-studies/>

In all four cities, the mayor and city CEO played an important role, lending support and sometimes stepping in to persuade sceptical department heads or council members to cooperate. In Boa Vista and Tirana, the mayors led the programme's adoption and became its public face. In Tel Aviv, the change was more bottom-up. Municipal officers organised support across departments and mobilised results from early projects to help the mayor see the initiative's potential and strengthen his commitment. The mayors' motivations and theories of change varied, but in all instances their support was crucial.

Tirana created new structures to finance and deliver the programme, while Tel Aviv, Boa Vista, and Recife used experience from previous programmes and existing foundations or trusts as vehicles for receiving outside funds, bringing partners together, keeping an eye on results, and maximising the chances of the policy being sustained across changes of administration.

The four case studies provide further valuable ideas on embedding early childhood provision into integrated governance structures, helping to bring early childhood into the workstream of city departments. Effective collaboration and two different types of governance integration are essential for scaling urban early childhood services and initiatives: first, integration horizontally between departments; and secondly, but to a lesser extent, vertically across city and national levels.

The city governments usually coordinated Urban95 through a small team in charge of implementation monitoring, troubleshooting, and planning. In Recife, the mayor empowered a chief of staff to bring department heads together and continuously improve the programme through close monitoring of interventions. Tel Aviv vested similar responsibility in staff members who operated out of a department, instead of the office of the mayor. Mutual trust and strong networking between departments were an important way to strengthen horizontal integration in Tel Aviv with key individuals acting as the mediators between departments.

Recife and Boa Vista show how Urban95 projects can scale more effectively when national policies already support investment in early childhood. Tying the Urban95 programme to existing Brazilian national policies, as was done in Boa Vista, can help accelerate change. In Tel Aviv, the absence of a national policy initially slowed the city's response. However, the division of authority between local and national levels later shaped the programme that emerged.

Across the board, the city officials pointed to the positive impact of study trips and executive education workshops in overcoming scepticism among key staff members. Public works officials usually found it hard to understand the case for collaborating with NGOs or city health and education officers on projects serving children under age 3, so viewing an example on the ground brought abstract ideas to life. Workshops helped develop ideas and generate enthusiasm. In some instances, occasional check-backs with officials from other cities helped sustain momentum.

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In all of the cases, leaders used pilots or an initial set of investments to help build public support. Both Tirana and Tel Aviv implemented their first playground investments in central parts of the city, which helped push early childhood interventions into the spotlight.

In fragile or distrustful neighbourhoods, city officials found it was helpful to work with existing non-profit organisations that had previously built knowledge and trust with citizens. In Recife, for example, a network of community peace agents proved invaluable in fostering understanding and conducting caregivers and children to a service centre, co-located in its own facilities.

Inculcating a sense of civic responsibility for maintenance of spaces and respect for traffic calming initially challenged some of the municipalities: no sooner had a 'pocket park' been created than vandals damaged equipment. Gradually the municipalities affected began to adapt, by trying to inculcate civic spirit, purchasing equipment that was less vulnerable, or some combination of the two.



Sticking points

The case studies reveal some shared difficulties and tentative solutions. The cities prioritised action over evaluation, which was understandable. However, without an initial effort to think ahead about how to evaluate performance, most cities lacked baseline data and had limited evidence of early-stage or intermediate impact to share with voters or to help with decision making.

When the city teams eventually settled on indicators, the next challenge was to induce frontline providers in NGOs or government offices to collect and share the necessary information. Many were too busy, and in most instances the innovation team did not follow up. There were some exceptions, however: Tel Aviv won the assistance of service providers in administering surveys to parents who used their services, and came up with creative ways to collect data, such as spot checks to count people using a playground or park. These experiences point to the future importance of building evaluation processes into programme design before the investments are complete.

Some of the cities engaged university knowledge partners and student volunteers to assist in data collection, but these collaborations often worked less well than anticipated. Although students proved helpful in conducting one- or two-day mapping operations using careful instructions, other forms of student participation were harder to manage as the students and their professors had competing demands on their time. Short, intensive, defined tasks with potential payback for research – or paid commitments to play specific roles – may hold greater promise.

Collecting evidence could have helped allay another problem: managing the risk of politicisation and improving sustainability. While mayors wanted to be able to point to compelling, concrete accomplishments, they also had to reduce the risk that the project would be identified too closely with their own political party and have no lasting effect if another party came to office. In some instances, vesting responsibility for some aspects of the programme in a city foundation or partnership helped improve sustainability by improving staff continuity and by providing a neutral forum for assessing results.

In some cases national statutes designed to minimise politicisation banned new investments or receipt of outside funds in the months leading up to an election. This created a planning challenge. To avoid delays in funds transfers or project execution, project teams had to prepare carefully and ensure that all operations scheduled to take place during the run-up to an election commenced before the start of this period.

Future scaling issues

Here at Princeton ISS, we considered it an innovative idea to use urban planning and service coordination to help scale services to under-served families

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with young children. Whether it will work depends not only on municipal coordination – on which our studies focused – but also on timing, creativity, and aligning the programme to needs. Six issues need to be considered.

1 Changes to infrastructure

It is not easy or cheap to alter public works, such as pavements or roads. Opportunities arise during expansion or rehabilitation, so the success of this approach to scaling may depend in part on whether these opportunities coincide in time and place with programme priorities. That said, creative solutions are also possible: for example, while Tirana embarked on major overhauls of public space, Tel Aviv experimented with pop-up parks, traffic calming along streets parents often used, and conversion of small kiosks to educational toy sheds, which required far less investment in durable infrastructure.

2 Location of investments

The location of these investments, whether permanent pieces of infrastructure or pop-up parks, raises further challenges. Tirana and Tel Aviv initially invested in the most prominent or central public places in the city. One might refer to this strategy as ‘campaign urbanism’ where investments are situated to generate attention from both the public and the media. This approach can be a useful way to build initial momentum in the programme, as in the case of Tel Aviv, but it does come with the risk of public resistance, as in the case of Tirana. Further, while very visible investments in famous city locations may broaden the base of public support, they are also vulnerable to criticism that they neglect the neediest families. Balancing steps to build support with the need to extend services to deprived neighbourhoods is one of the hardest judgements Urban95 leaders have to make.

3 Human resources

The case studies did not address staffing costs and quality, which could become significant impediments to scale, depending on labour market conditions and service utilisation rates. One solution, in Tel Aviv, was to integrate the programme with other projects and plans that departments were developing, enabling more efficient use of resources. For example, project leaders realised that some of the intellectual stimulation required for early childhood development could take place without professional assistance in the context of the city’s parks and playgrounds, where they were already making investments. The city also encouraged new parents to install a smartphone app, Digitaf, that links caregivers with a variety of programmes and with each other, helping to lessen the need for staff by harnessing peer-to-peer assistance. This option may prove helpful in other countries where access to technology is broadly shared.

4 Optimising service provision

Only in a few instances did cities experiment comprehensively with grouping multiple services in ‘priority zones’ or modulating building hours and public transport routes. Co-locating services and using facilities such as schools as

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service points after hours have potential to increase access and decrease operating costs in the longer term. However, there are start-up costs. The cities we profiled pursued these options only on a limited scale, probably because of the upfront information required to plan and coordinate.

5 Reaching other sectors

Identifying co-benefits may help scale these types of early childhood development initiatives in the future. For example, adopting a child lens helps achieve improvements in walkability and air quality, while focusing on the latter issues will help improve life for children. Broadening the aims that Urban95 programmes serve expands the coalition of support and increases the probability that leaders will invest. The co-benefits approach is an increasingly popular way for city leaders to introduce new social and environmental endeavours that also improve the outcomes of other sectors in the city. It encourages collaboration over competition between departments in a city and specifically around financial resources shared between these departments.

6 Sustainability: from institutional change to behavioural change

Finally, scaling will depend on how well cities can embed the programme in municipal processes and services. One approach is through the law: Recife, for example, passed a law authorising the city to spend resources to support early childhood development in its activities, including investment in public space to mark the city's 500th anniversary. However, sustainability will require changing the culture by fostering broad public understanding of how the programme creates value for communities.

Success or failure on each of these six challenges and opportunities depends on the ability to collaborate across government departments and assess costs and benefits accurately, using evidence. In the next phase of their work, the cities profiled in the studies will help to inspire others.

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